

May 23, 2005

Warm Weather Brings Ticks and Higher Risk for Certain Diseases

The pleasant weather of spring and summer invites us to be more active and to increase the amount of time we spend outdoors. The New River Health District urges everyone to be on the lookout for ticks and to take precautions to avoid them when outdoors.

If they're infected, different kinds of ticks can be responsible for transmitting a number of diseases. Lyme disease is a bacterial disease that is transmitted by the bite of the deer tick, a small tick that is about the size of the tip of a pencil. These ticks are found not only on deer, but also on birds and many small animals such as field mice and other rodents. Rocky Mountain spotted fever, a potentially fatal infectious disease, can be carried by the American dog tick. Scientists suspect that both the Lone Star tick, with its characteristic white spot on the back, and the deer tick, are responsible for transmitting the two forms of ehrlichiosis--a tickborne disease of humans and animals caused by bacteria named *Ehrlichia*. Bites from several different types of ticks can lead to tularemia, also known as rabbit fever or deerfly fever.

Dr. Jody Hershey, Director of the New River Health District, states that, The best measure against tick-borne disease is prevention. To prevent diseases associated with ticks, try to avoid areas that are known to be tick-infested, particularly during May, June, and July. When hiking, stay in the center of mowed trails to avoid brushing against vegetation. If you must be in a tick-infested area, Dr. Hershey suggests wearing light-colored clothing since ticks are easier to spot against light colors. Clothes should cover your legs and arms. Pants should be tucked into your socks and closed shoes should be worn. Tick repellent can be helpful. Repellents that contain no more than 50 percent DEET for adults and no more than 30 percent for children under 12 or 0.5 percent permethrin are most effective. Permethrin products work only on clothing, not skin. Always read repellent directions carefully before use, especially with use on children or pets. Some tick repellents can cause toxic or severe allergic reactions.

If you are working or playing in a wooded area or an area with dense vegetation, check your body for ticks every 3-4 hours. It is important to check all areas of your body for ticks, but be especially careful to check along the hairline, on the tops of boots and shoes, and under shirt collars. If you find a tick on your body, promptly remove the tick by gripping it with tweezers as close to the skin as possible and gently pulling straight out. If tweezers are not available, use your fingers to remove the tick, but protect your hands with gloves, a cloth, or a tissue. Do not remove ticks using nail polish, petroleum jelly, alcohol, or a hot match. After the tick has been removed, wash hands thoroughly with soap and water. Alcohol or iodine should then be applied to the site of the tick bite. Most importantly, if you do get a tick bite, make a note of it on your calendar or other place that you will remember. In the event that you do begin to have symptoms associated with a tick-borne disease, telling your doctor that you have had a tick bite will immediately help him or her prescribe appropriate blood tests and medication.

Home and pet owners can also do a few simple things to prevent tick infestation near their homes. Birds or other animals that may harbor ticks should be discouraged from coming close to your house. Putting up bird feeders within close proximity to your house can attract not only birds, but may also attract rodents that carry deer ticks. Keeping grass cut and underbrush thinned in yards will also discourage ticks. If you use chemicals to control ticks, follow pesticide directions carefully or hire a professional. Use flea and tick collars or other tick preventives on your cats and dogs. Also, brush your pets thoroughly after they have been outdoors. Remember that dogs and cats can also get tickborne disease and pet owners should take these extra measures to protect their pets.